

Blair, Marion  
(Indiana artist)

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ARTISTS - B



# Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

Marion Blair

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection





**Steele**, who painted portraits of nine Indiana Governors, to be "a true Lincoln of more than ordinary character," has been found in the home of Dr. Rodney D. Smith, of Bloomington, grandnephew of Marion Blair, who painted the picture nearly sixty years ago.

The picture is in an oval frame about 13x17 inches, and while it has had no attention since the original varnish was applied, it is in excellent state of preservation. The signature "M. Blair" is barely discernable, a fact which helps to establish the work as that of the Monroe county Blair and not that of another Blair whose name was found among the list of students at an Indianapolis art school which was struggling for existence about the time the picture was made. Although Marion Blair enjoyed some renown as a portrait painter in civil war days, he was not disposed to advertise his work. Some known examples of his painting are not signed.

Blair was born in Bloomington and spent most of his life in Monroe county, going to Indianapolis occasionally to fill orders for portraits. He was in Indianapolis at the time Lincoln's body lay in state in the old Statehouse, and it was from an impression gained at that time, when he spent the entire day viewing the body and then returning to the foot of the long line of mourners to pass by again, that he made the picture. Mr. Steele sees in the painting some resemblance to steel engravings of Lincoln which were popular soon after the great leader's death, and Blair may have been influenced by them. The Brady photographs for which Lincoln sat the latter part of the civil war period show that Lincoln was somewhat more careful about the arrangement of his stock and collar than is indicated by the Blair portrait, and suggest that Blair might have gained some of his ideas from earlier pictures of Lincoln. But in general the picture resembles the Brady photographs as to the features, and bears testimony to the accuracy of Blair's observation.

#### Spent Boyhood on Farm.

The history of Marlon Blair's life is striking proof of the fact that genius may spring to life in unexpected places and assert itself against great odds. Blair was born January 22, 1824, in Bloomington, the son of Enos Blair, sheriff of Monroe county. In 1837 the Blair family resources were reduced by the panic and the family moved to the country seven miles southwest of Bloomington, in a neighborhood which has since been called Blair Hollow. The boy was sent to an academy and was for a time a student at Indiana University, but there is no record of his graduation.

From the stories about his youth and early manhood which still persist in the Blair Hollow neighborhood, it appears that he was regarded as shiftless. He had no aptitude for

farming, either as a young man on his father's farm or later, after he married and took land of his own. He spent much of his time in the open. He refused to clear his land of trees. The neighbors said it was because he was too lazy to chop and plow and plant, but his defense was that he enjoyed the trees and had no desire to ruin his woods. He talked to the birds and wild animals, a habit which further confirmed the neighbors' impression that he was worthless. His queer manners and proclivities resulted eventually in the departure of his wife and children for Kansas, leaving him alone in the cabin which he had built and which he continued to occupy until his death.

He was, however, a useful citizen and neighbor. The whole community for miles around depended on him for legal advice, called on him to write letters, patch up lovers' quarrels and to solve the political problems which perplexed the minds of busy farmers who had little time to read. Blair read the newspaper and took several magazines. Pioneers who recall his career in Blair hollow say that he never refused to help a neighbor.

#### Had Desire to Paint.

There is no record that he ever received any formal instruction in art. His own explanation is that the desire to paint came to him and he "just did it." He made pictures of persons in the neighborhood, and finally went to Indianapolis and obtained several orders. His method of work was to paint from memory after studying his subject. Some of the people whom he painted did not know he was working on their picture until he showed them the finished product. This fact was taken into consideration by persons who sought to identify the Lincoln painting as an authentic and independent production.

He was commissioned by the Indiana general assembly to paint a portrait of Governor Oliver P. Morton. He completed this picture, but in some manner it was lost. It was not until 1921 that it was returned to the state. It was found in Cleveland, in the attic of a house occupied by W. P. Blair, a descendant of the Monroe county Blair family. Mr. Blair brought it to the Statehouse and turned it over to Demarchus Brown, state librarian. The canvas, which is approximately 4x7 feet, had been removed from its frame and rolled. Mr. Blair was unable to account for its presence in the attic among a number of relics and heirlooms. The Morton portrait is badly soiled and checked, but the likeness agrees with other portraits of the state's civil war Governor, and although unsigned bears such strong resemblance to Blair's other work that its identity has not been questioned. It is being preserved in the state archives until such time as money for its restoration is available.

#### An "Intolerable Whittler."

Marlon Blair's genius found expression in other forms. His woven baskets were greatly admired for their lines as well as for their sturdiness. His wood carvings, many of which are preserved in the Blair Hollow neighborhood and in Bloomington, have been admired for their perfect symmetry, their chaste design, and their restraint. He was, in the words of his neighborhood, "an intolerable whittler," and "just fiddled and fuddled away his time whittlin' things out or settin' in the woods playin' with the squirrels." His only tool was a jackknife, yet, as the two examples of his carving shown in the photograph prove, he was able to obtain some extraordinary results. For his wood carvings he used hard curly maple knots. The spoons shown in the picture are the property of Mrs. James S. Hudson, of Hendricksville, Greene county, whose parents lived in Marlon Blair's house and worked for him in his later years, when he operated a grist mill which he had built on his farm.

Blair was a "greenbacker," and carved a peculiar wooden spoon, with a snake entwined about the handle, its head dipping in the bowl. This he sent to General Ben Butler, who was dubbed Spoony Butler in the campaign. He also sent an original "greenback" poem to Butler, who published the poem in his newspaper and made use of the spoon in his campaign.

and regarded him with a degree of reverence which he usually reserved for the beauties of nature which appealed to him.

The Lincoln picture was very dear to him. He regarded it as the proof that his art studies had not been wasted. He was glad that when he had opportunity to see his hero he also had the ability to carry away an accurate impression of his appearance and to set it down on canvas for the enjoyment and inspiration of future generations.

In his later years he lived largely to himself. He was known by some as the recluse of Blair Hollow. The failure of his family life seems to have weighed heavily on him in later years. A neighbor who knew him well described him as "that gruff and brashy he skeered a person when he said things in his lordly way. His deep voice beltered out, and if you didn't know how kind he war under the skin, you'd want to let him alone." In later years he was invited by a committee of the legislature to go to Indianapolis to retouch the Morton portrait, but he informed the committee that he was out of practice and besides he did not have the clothes to dress properly for a trip to Indianapolis. The committee was unable to shake him in his decision.

#### Stories of Eccentricity.

The Blair Hollow neighborhood people recall many stories of his eccentricity. There was a good spring on his farm, and this served as his washbasin every morning, even in the coldest winter when he had to break the ice. He would never allow the Lincoln picture out of his possession, and would show it only as a great favor to his friends. He never volunteered to display it. In time his cabin became known for its curious examples of native handicraft, and many persons called to see his work. This did not please him, and sometimes his visitors, especially the women, got the impression that his manners were uncouth. To his older friends, however, he was always the same, and the younger people in the immediate neighborhood always called him Uncle Marlon. He was somewhat sensitive about his age, and in answer to queries as to how old he was always answered, even until the time of his death in 1901: "I am twenty-six." He is buried in Rose Hill cemetery at Bloomington, beside his father and mother. His possessions were sold after his death or given away to relatives and neighbors.

Theodore C. Steele, head of the Indiana University art school, examined the Blair portrait of Lincoln and made the following report on it: "There is no doubt this is a true Lincoln, and of more than ordinary character. The work is not that of an amateur by any means. It shows life and character skillfully put into the face."


"I have seen the pose in steel engravings or wood cuts, but whether the artist used photographic poses of his day to aid him, or whether he depended entirely upon his personal memory of President Lincoln and upon his brush skill to portray the character, depends somewhat upon the genius of the artist."

#### Work of an Artist.

"If this portrait is an original painting from memory it must certainly be classed among the valuable art treasures; but if it is a copy, made from another artist's work, of course, it is not so valuable, even if it is plainly the work of an artist, who was master of his art."

"As a portrait of Lincoln, the picture is strong. The character is seen in the high forehead and eyes. Although the view of the face and head is different from that seen in the recent painting by Douglas Volk, the same fundamental likenesses are noticeable, especially in the lines, in the eyes—which are hazel blue, almost hazel brown—the nose, mouth, chin and high cheek."

"It is not improbable that this old painting of Abraham Lincoln is at least partly an original piece of creative work, as from what we know of Marlon Blair's work he had ability as a portrait painter above ordinary. And from what has been recently revealed about his eccentric life, I would hesitate to say this picture might be a copy, even considering the similarity of pose to other pictures of Lincoln. The steel engraving painted in Barrett's 'Life



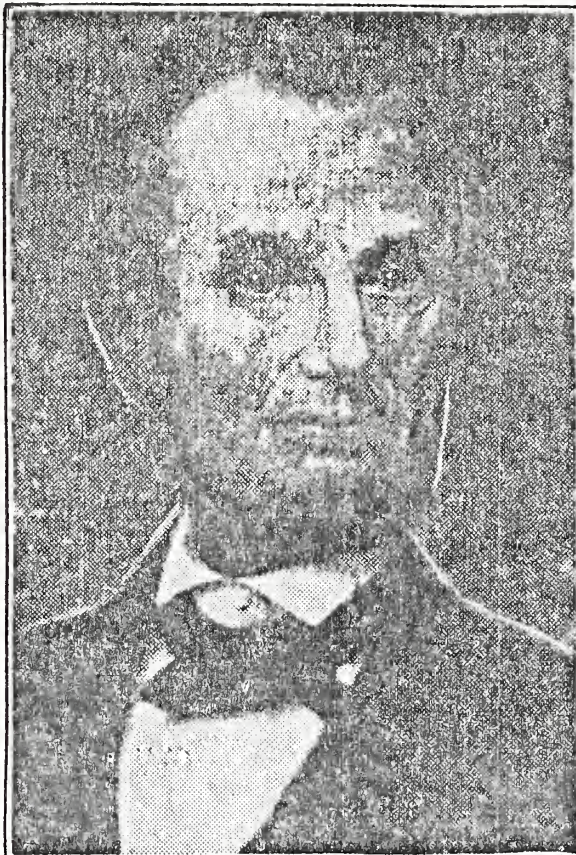
Digitized by the Internet Archive  
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State of Indiana through the Indiana State Library

<http://archive.org/details/artistxxxxx00linc>

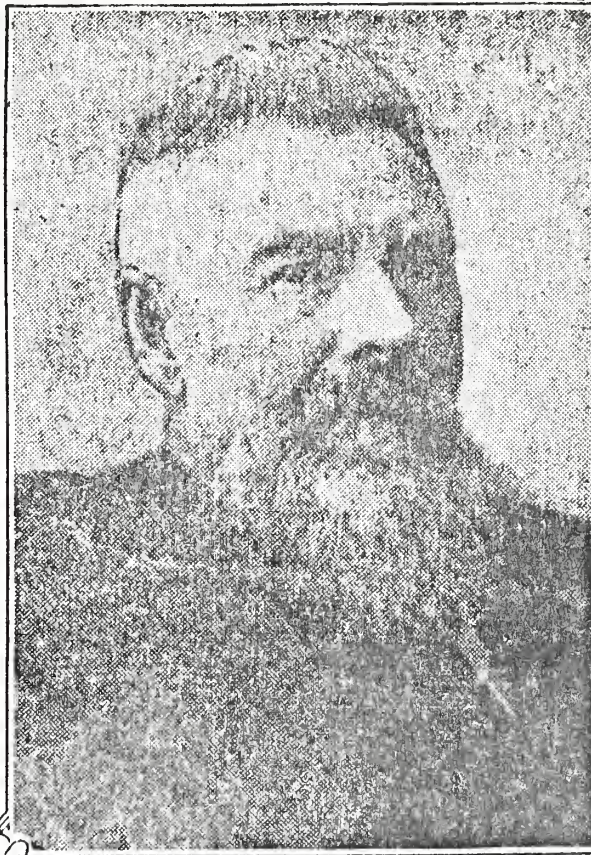


# **PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN FOUND IN BLOOMINGTON HOME PAINTED BY MARION BLAIR NEARLY SIXTY YEARS AGO**

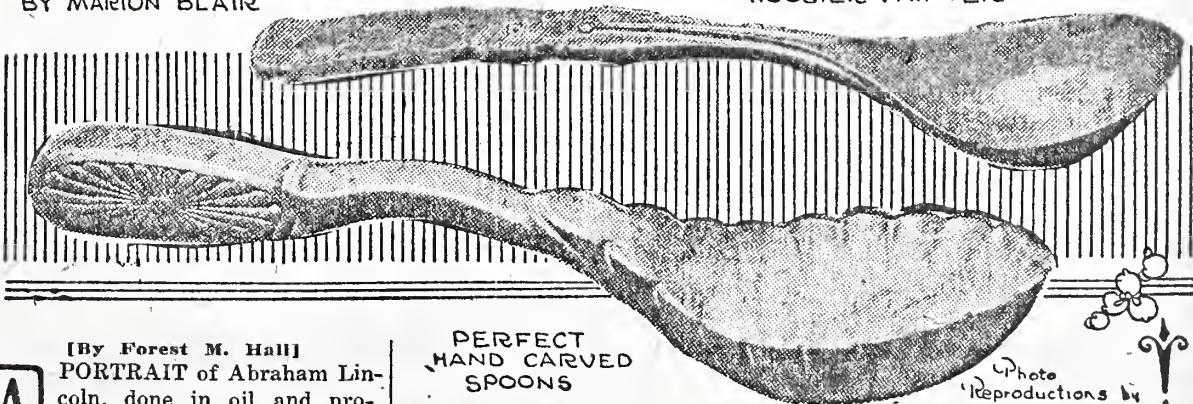
"A True Lincoln of More Than Ordinary Character," Is the Opinion Expressed by Theodore C. Steele After a Study of the Work—Blair Was Regarded as Peculiar, by His Neighbors—Spent Many Years of His Life Alone in Cabin in Blair Hollow.



PAINTING OF LINCOLN  
 BY MARION BLAIR



MARION BLAIR. FORGOTTEN  
 HOOSIER PAINTER



PERFECT  
 HAND CARVED  
 SPOONS

[By Forest M. Hall]  
 PORTRAIT of Abraham Lin-  
 coln, done in oil and pro-  
 nounced by Theodore C.

Photo  
 Reproductions by  
 CHAS GILBERT SHAW







## INDIANA UNIVERSITY · News Release

BLOOMINGTON · INDIANAPOLIS · EAST (RICHMOND)  
FORT WAYNE · KOKOMO · NORTHWEST (GARY)  
SOUTH BEND · SOUTHEAST (NEW ALBANY)

NEWS BUREAU  
306 North Union St.  
Bloomington, Indiana 47405  
812-337-3911

Feb. 10, 1981 *1 copy filed in Artists  
drawers: Blair, Marion* IU'S LINCOLN PORTRAIT  
HAS TWIN IN INDIANAPOLIS,  
NEW EVIDENCE SHOWS

*1 copy filed: Ind. Univ. (original)*

BLOOMINGTON, Ind.--A portrait of Abraham Lincoln, once believed to be the final painting of Monroe County artist, Marion Blair, may not be that, according to Everett Wilkie, reference librarian at Indiana University's Lilly Library.

Wilkie reported in a recent interview new evidence which suggests that at least two Blair paintings--one of Lincoln and one of Indiana's Civil War governor, Oliver P. Morton, may post-date the painting in Lilly Library's Lincoln collection.

The story behind the painting is fascinating, according to Wilkie.

Blair apparently stood in line three times on a rainy Indianapolis afternoon and evening to view the body of the recently-assassinated president, lying in state in the Indiana Statehouse.

Blair was born in Monroe County in 1824 and lived on a farm in the western part of the county, all the while developing a reputation as a portrait painter. The foundation of his farmhouse, seven miles from Bloomington, is still visible today, Wilkie said. Blair died in 1901.

Wilkie said it is believed that Blair passed through the crowded Statehouse three times, catching momentary glimpses of Lincoln's face



and shoulders and emblazoning them in his memory.

He then is thought to have returned to an Indianapolis studio to paint the portrait from his memory. That painting, believed to be Blair's last, was passed through the hands of family members and, in 1959, into the Indiana University Lincoln collection.

A December visit to Lilly Library by an Indianapolis medical doctor, however, has caused library personnel to re-evaluate the history of their Blair painting.

According to Wilkie, Dr. Gail Eldridge, M.D., an Indiana history buff, owns a portrait of Lincoln, signed by Blair and amazingly similar to the Lilly Library portrait. The painting was sold to Eldridge, Wilkie said, under the assumption that it was Blair's last work.

IU's painting is nearly identical to the one owned by Eldridge, Wilkie said, with great attention paid to details of Lincoln's face such as the scraggly hair, deep naso-labial folds and the mole on his right cheek.

In addition, Wilkie said, Eldridge owns a painting of Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton who was governor from 1860-67. That work is believed to be a companion piece to the Lincoln portrait. He said that the figure of Lincoln occupies a greater proportion of the Eldridge painting, though both portraits are identical in size.

Eldridge noted in a phone interview that today, all three paintings--the two Lincolns and the Morton--are mounted in identical frames made in Cincinnati. The Lincoln portrait owned by the Lilly Library was





apparently once mounted in a smaller frame, its canvas folded back to fit a smaller oval. Later, it was restretched to fit the larger, matching frame in which it is displayed today.

In addition, Eldridge pointed out that all three paintings may have come from members of the same southern Indiana family.

The IU portrait was donated by a Dr. Rodney Smith. Eldridge's paintings were purchased from a man named William Smith. Though there is no clear evidence that the two Smiths were related, it is possible that the Blair paintings were owned by the same family.

All of this evidence suggests that the IU painting may be only a study for the later Blair painting which is owned by Eldridge, Wilkie said.

The fact that IU's painting may not be Marion Blair's last is not really disappointing for Wilkie. "It's kind of exciting to think that somewhere out there, there is a companion piece to our Lincoln," he said. "Somewhere there must be a study of Governor Morton."

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Steve Bell  
812-337-3911





# Lincoln memorabilia housed at Lilly Library

By JOANNE NESBIT

IU News Bureau

The Lincoln Room of IUB's Lilly Library houses several hundred volumes by and about the 16th president of the United States.

The vaults of the rare book, manuscript and special collections library protect a faircopy manuscript on vellum (a copy of a document done after all corrections have been made) of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishing slavery.

And on the wall of the room devoted to the president called the "great emancipator" hang three portraits of Abraham Lincoln by three different artists. Each painting has its own fascinating story.

High on the wall opposite the entrance to the room are these words carved into a panel of burnished wood: "At the gateway to the country where Abraham Lincoln lived his youth, IU has established this Lincoln room for those who would study and gain inspiration from the

## See photo, Page 1

life and work of the great American."

The panel itself is surrounded by green damask wallpaper, a reproduction of wallpaper used in the White House while Lincoln was president.

Below those words rests a bronze bust of Lincoln, created by sculptor Gutzon Borglum. The bust sits on a marble base and attached to that are the president's words, "We, even we here, hold the power and bear the responsibility. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth."

Gazing at those words are two portraits of the president, one hung on either side of the room's entry.

One of those portraits, painted by Jesse Alwood, was done in 1860. Lincoln sat for the artist in the senate chambers in Springfield, Ill.

Alwood made three copies of the portrait and kept one for himself. That is the one hanging in the Lilly Library.

The other portrait, by Joseph Ames of New Hampshire, who was a genre and portrait artist based in Boston, is the last portrait of Lincoln painted from life. It was first exhibited to the public on May 15, 1865, one month and one day after Lincoln died from the gunshot fired by assassin John Wilkes Booth.

A relatively small oval portrait of Lincoln stares across the length of the room -- across the chair that Lincoln sat on in a Bloomington, Ill., courthouse where he served as circuit judge. According to Helen Walsh, the library's tour coordinator, Lincoln requested something more comfortable than the "bench" to sit on while hearing a case, and the chair was brought into the courtroom.

Lincoln's steady eyes also reach from the oval painting across the room to the opposite wall where the desk he used in a Springfield,

Ill., law office stands — the office he shared from 1841-44 with his law partner, Stephen T. Logan.

Unlike the other two portraits, the oval portrait was not painted from life, but rather from death after the artist saw the assassinated president's body lying in state in Indianapolis.

A self-taught painter who spent most of his life in the Bloomington area, a captain in the Civil War and one of Indiana's premiere painters, Marion Blair moved through the line of people viewing Lincoln's body. Then he went through the line again and again, returning to his easel after each trip to complete another part of the portrait.

The portraits, chair, desk, manuscripts and books of and about Abraham Lincoln can be seen in the Lilly Library, which is open 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday. The Library is closed Sundays. Admission is free.

For more information, phone 812-855-2452.

## Middle schoolers learn while helping at day-care center

Northwest News Bureau

While most preteens fill their after-school hours with chatter about the latest fads, a group of nine students from Gary's Pulaski Middle School meets once a week to swap tips on such topics as taming temper tantrums and building self-esteem.

The students are taking part in the "Boomerang" program, a trial project launched this semester at IUN's Child Care Center, an on-site day-care facility operated for the convenience of IUN students and employees.

Underlying the program's name is the hope that its effects will continue to be felt long after the six-week session ends, said Florence Sawicki, IUN associate professor of education and a member of the Center's oversight committee.

## Oscar Robertson luncheon speaker

By GEORGE VLAHAKIS

IU News Bureau

How can employees be motivated to work to the best of their ability and satisfaction? What can companies do to be ready for dramatic changes in the American economy and in the makeup of its work force between now and the end of this decade?

Those and other important questions will be addressed at the annual Indiana University Business Conference Feb. 25 at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis.

Fred G. Steingraber, chairman and chief executive officer of A.T. Kearney Inc., a leading global management consulting firm; Paula Nelson, author, television commentator and senior vice president of SRI-Gallup; and a panel of experts from the Hudson Institute lead the roster of speakers who will address the conference.

Oscar Robertson, one of Indiana's greatest

companies.

Those attending the conference will hear directly from the experts who produced the book, including its two co-authors, about what their research means to the individual business person. They also will share their current thinking on economic and social trends.

The Hudson panel will consist of Leslie Lenkowsky, president; Denis P. Doyle, senior research fellow; and William B. Johnston and Arnold H. Packer, co-authors of *Workforce 2000*.

At lunch, basketball legend Robertson will share his insights from his careers on and off the hardwood.

"Big O" was a member of championship teams at all levels of competition, including at Crispus Attucks High School, the University of Cincinnati, the 1960 U.S. Olympic Gold Medal team and teams in the National Basketball Association. He was voted the all-time Mr.

chairman of Canadian firms Unigesco Inc. and Provigo Inc.; James L. Pate, president and CEO of Pennzoil Co.; and as Distinguished Entrepreneur, John R. Barney, president of Barney Enterprise Management Service Inc. of Crown Point.

In addition to the major presentations, participants may choose from six workshops meeting concurrently in the late afternoon. Sessions include "Effective Organizational Training: The Challenge of a Diverse Workforce," "Retailing Today and Tomorrow," "Winding the Business of Your Personal Finances," "The Train is Boarding — Is Your Company Ready for EC 92?" "The Business of the Arts" and "Managing Health Care Costs from the Perspective of the Employer."

Registration fee for the conference and luncheon is \$80 per person. Company sponsored tables of 10 are \$750. Registration deadline is Feb. 14, with only a limited number

# Business conference slated Feb. 25





# WANTED CENTRAL INDIANA

knowledge and awareness, and (3) then determine their preferences on solutions to the problems.

HELP WANTED was featured for a four-week period on Indianapolis television station WTHR, and in the *Indianapolis Star*, *Indianapolis News* and *Bloomington Herald-Times*. Indiana University assisted in sponsoring the campaign.

Among the findings:

## Economy

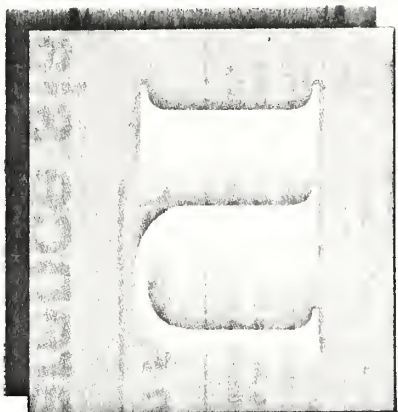
- 95 percent named the federal budget deficit and the effect of a substantial number of illiterate workers as the top two threats to the American standard of living
- 88 percent said businesses pay too much attention to short-term profits instead of long-

improving the basic skills and education of the work force and 76 percent supported intensive "dropout prevention" efforts

- 81 percent felt U.S. companies are not investing enough in new products and equipment
- 66 percent said salaries should be based on performance rather than an automatic time

*Continued on Page 4*

# The



# Newspaper

Vol. 16, Issue 5

Feb. 14, 1992

## Lincoln memorabilia at IUB

**Joseph Ames'**  
portrait of  
Abraham Lincoln  
(right) was first  
exhibited to the  
public on May 15,  
1865 -- one month  
and one day after  
Lincoln died from  
the gunshot fired  
by assassin John  
Wilkes Booth. The  
portrait now hangs  
in the Lincoln  
Room of IU's Lilly  
Library, located on  
the Bloomington  
campus (see story,  
Page 2).



## Race differences

*IU study shows demographic variances  
almost disappeared in Indiana during 1980s*

By GEORGE VLAHAKIS

IU News Bureau

Major demographic differences between whites and African Americans in Indiana all but disappeared during the 1980s, writes an IUB demographer in a recently released study.

Fertility and migration rates for both racial groups in Indiana were virtually the same as the state entered the 1990s, according to an analysis of 1990 U.S. census results by the Indiana Business Research Center at the School of Business in Bloomington.

"As further census data becomes available, particularly information on economic status, income may replace black-white differentials as the predominant factor in demographic change," said Jerry McKibben, the Center's demographer and the study's author.

"This phenomenon represents a major departure from previous comparisons," he said.

"Over the last 175 years in this state there have been major differences in the fertility, mortality and migration patterns of blacks and whites."

Indiana's population grew at a rate of 0.98 percent during the 1980s, compared to the U.S. growth rate of 9.8 percent. The growth rate for whites in Indiana was just 0.24 percent, which means that a higher percentage of the state's growth can be attributed to the increased population of other racial groups.

The growth rate for African Americans in Indiana was 4.25 percent; for Native Americans, 31.26 percent; and Asian and Pacific Islanders, 54.45 percent.

Hispanic Americans are not classified as a

*Continued on Page 3*

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Folksongs being recorded for posterity -- Page 5  
Axolotls part of IU research on healing -- Page 8





Black, Marvin  
(Northern District)

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